

Fred Melo, *Pioneer Press*

Twin Cities community members mourn the death of Gen. Vang Pao, who led their exodus to America after a bitter loss.

Ice Yang broke down in tears Friday, saying he'd driven an hour from his home in St. Michael, Minn., to pay respects in St. Paul to the late Gen. Vang Pao. As a 7-year-old boy in Laos, he met the Hmong leader and later sang for him at a birthday celebration in Minnesota.

"Without General Vang, we would not be standing here," Ice Yang, 38, said during a vigil at the Lao Family Community on University Avenue before adding, "I'm sorry," and breaking down again. "At this point, I don't think we will have someone to replace him."

At the vigil, mourners with incense knelt and bowed before a white table adorned with flowers and candles, overlooked by a large photo of the Royal Army of Laos general. About 100 folding chairs were quickly filled. Another 100 were brought out, and those were filled as well.

Vang Pao became famous for fighting losing battles in an unpopular U.S. war that killed or displaced more than a third of his kinsmen, but Hmong elders in Minnesota revered him as their leader in exile. As a teenager, he'd taken on the Japanese in their attempts to control Laos during World War II, and he later joined the French against the communist forces of North Vietnam.

But it was the general's work with a CIA-backed guerrilla force in Laos during the Vietnam War that paved the way for him and thousands of Hmong to rebuild their community on U.S. soil, largely in Minnesota, Wisconsin and California.

In the Twin Cities, his legacy is palpable. Vang Pao never

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officially lived in Minnesota, but he still played major roles in founding a series of nonprofits aimed at helping Hmong families gain their footing and Hmong soldiers find services.

Among them were the Lao Family Community organization, the Hmong 18 Clan Council, Minnesota Laos Veterans, and the SGU Veterans and Family Organization. Another, the Vang Pao Foundation, shut down in 2005 under pressure from the Minnesota attorney general's office for alleged mismanagement.

How will history remember Vang Pao? Most likely as both a venerated and controversial figure, a dedicated uniter whose dreams of repatriating his people in a noncommunist Laos likely died with him. The CIA-led "secret war" in Laos never ended for the general, and his open desire to overthrow his homeland's communist government more than three decades after the end of the Vietnam conflict sometimes put him at odds with Minnesota politicians, law enforcement and even some of his fellow Hmong.

Vang Pao died Thursday night in a Fresno, Calif., area hospital at 81. He had been hospitalized since late December with pneumonia and a heart condition.

Hmong-Americans held vigils for him in St. Paul and are planning a daylong funeral in central California, where thousands of Hmong - an ethnic minority from the hillsides of Laos - also settled after being driven from their homeland after the U.S. lost the war in Vietnam in 1975.

Vang Pao's family has asked that he be buried in Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, an honor usually reserved for U.S. veterans and their families. That effort has the support of former U.S. Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., who called Vang Pao "a giant" and "an American war hero."

"Because of his courage, American lives were saved, and the lives of downed pilots in America's secret war in Laos," Coleman said. "He deserves to be buried at Arlington."

Vang Pao's influence in the Hmong community was greatest with an older generation that defers major decisions to a system of 18 clans, over which he unofficially presided by selecting the leader of the system's mediation council.

"Many of the Hmong who live here are considered his offspring, because we call him father. I call him father, too. It's a way of respecting a leader and a person who has done so much for the Hmong community," said 49-year-old Ka Houa Yang, president of the Lao Family Community of Minnesota. "In Laos, I heard about Vang Pao when I was a kid. I looked at him as a superman."

That reverence could be unsettling for some. In 2000, when U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., was campaigning for her congressional seat, she was surprised to find herself speaking at a Hmong gathering with her back to a larger-than-life-size portrait of the general.

Later, the two would sometimes clash. Over Vang Pao's objections, McCollum spent years advocating that the U.S. normalize trade relations with communist Laos, which she argued would improve the quality of life there for many Laotians and introduce democratic ideals. President George W. Bush signed a bill to that effect in 2004.

Vang Pao also had successes in Washington.

His allies succeeded in blocking the appointment of a U.S. ambassador to Laos from 1999 to 2001. Persistent lobbying also helped secure special citizenship benefits in 2000 for Hmong veterans and family members, enabling them to take the U.S. citizenship test in their native language. In 2001, further lobbying secured an additional 18-month extension for the unusual citizenship program.

Social welfare advocates, however, raised concerns that Vang Pao and his supporters were effectively selling low-income Hmong families commissions in a symbolic or unofficial army. A certain donation could grant a person the rank of lieutenant, for instance.

That, and his supporters' habit of flocking to public events dressed in military uniforms, did not escape the notice of federal authorities. In 2007, Vang Pao and 10 others were indicted in California on charges of conspiring to violently overthrow the Laotian government. The charges against Vang Pao were dropped two years later.

"On the one hand, he was a totally iconic figure in the community," said Bill Harper, McCollum's chief of staff. "On the other hand, there was a lot of controversy."

Nancy Meyer, an educator and activist with the Neighborhood House social service agency, spent years working with adult learners at the Hmong American Partnership in St. Paul. Through her students, she came to have a nuanced view of the general.

"He didn't seem that willing to meet with people outside of the community, and I think that over time his influence outside of the community waned," Meyer said. "He became more controversial, the further away we got from the Vietnam War. It seemed like he became radicalized. ... The younger Hmong tend to have a much more detached view, and don't follow his insistence for his reclaiming of Laos."

"The older Hmong, there's still this sort of patriotism for a country that they never really had in the first place," Meyer added. "There's reverence and respect, but there's some anger, too, for getting them involved in the U.S. effort."

On Friday, McCollum put the controversies behind her and had a more positive memory of Vang Pao entered into the Congressional Record.

She wrote: "Over the years, I had the honor of joining General Vang Pao at many events such as: the Hmong American New Year celebrations and the July Soccer Festival celebrations in St. Paul, as he had always come to the Twin Cities to join the Hmong community for those events.

"Most recently, I had the great honor of joining him for the grand opening celebrations of the Hmong Village Center on the Eastside of St. Paul on October 30, 2010. Although frail from his failing health and sitting in his chair, the General was in good spirits and spoke eloquently to a large gathering crowd at the celebrations. Sadly, this was the last time I saw him."

One of his sons, Lu Vang, 39, attended the University Avenue vigil on Friday and remembered his father as a liberator.

"All his life, he dedicated himself to help the Hmong, to try to do the best he could to unite the whole people as one," Lu Vang said. "Every speech, he would always say, 'As long as I see a Hmong person miserable or poor, we are not perfect yet. The Hmong have to be united.' "

Dai Thao, co-regional director of Take Action Minnesota's Hmong Organizing Program, also

attended the vigil to pay his respects.

"I think he's an example of the kind of potential that Hmong-Americans have. During the Vietnam conflict, he was not given a lot of resources, and he was not educated at Harvard, but he made some of the most critical choices. ... By aligning with the Americans and pursuing democracy in Laos, that's led a lot of us here.

"Some people might hold anger ... we lost (so many) of our fellow Hmong," Dai Thao continued. "Do we let them die in vain? Or do we pursue success and prosperity? Do we live for them?"